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Missing soldiers' kin say it's now or never

*Where have all our fathers gone?
Left in jungles all alone.
When will their fate be known?
When will their fate be known?*

— Verse sung by the sons and daughters
of Americans still listed as missing in
action in the Vietnam war to the tune of
"Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"

After nearly 12 years since Americans held prisoner in Southeast Asia came home, there is a sense of movement in the diplomatic gridlock over this unresolved legacy from the U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

When those POWs arrived home amid a media hype, most of their countrymen assumed all of them were back. But an opposing view was held by an important minority — the members of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia.

From the beginning, family members questioned whether all of the prisoners had been repatriated and whether the Vietnamese government had provided all of the information it has about its captives and those listed as missing in action — a figure the Defense Department says totals more than 2,460 for both groups.

These reservations were not without some basis. Vietnam had provided lists of U.S. prisoners. But when the POWs were released in 1973, some of those listed were not in the group. Moreover, no information was offered about what happened to these missing Americans.

There were cases like that of Navy Cmdr. Ronald Dodge, who was shot down in North Vietnam in 1967 and whose picture appeared that year in *Paris-Match* and *Life*. He was not released in 1973. His remains were returned in 1981, and Vietnam has never supplied an explanation.

There's the case of Col. David

Hrdlicka, U.S. Air Force, whose chute was observed opening over Laos and who was seen on the ground. A post-capture photo of him was obtained. He also allegedly made a broadcast in May 1966, the text of which appeared in U.S. Foreign Information Service documents. In 1966 his photo appeared in *Pravda*, which identified him as a

"bandit U.S. pilot." But no information on Col. Hrdlicka has been released by Vietnam.

Lt. Cmdr. Barton Creed was shot down along the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos on March 13, 1971. After ejecting from his plane he radioed from the ground to the rescue craft that he had a broken leg and arm. His last message was: "Pick me up now. Pick me up now. They are here."

Rescue planes made four unsuccessful attempts in the next 24 hours to rescue him. One rescue pilot reported that Lt. Cmdr. Creed was "most certainly alive" when U.S. forces attempted rescue. Laos provided no information on the case.

There are other examples which the league of families keeps on file. And there are league members, such as Janet Townley of Hesperia, Calif., who carries photos of her father, Roy Townley, wherever she goes. She and her stepmother lived with Mr. Townley when he was a civilian in 1971. He was shot down in Laos on Dec. 27, 1971.

The photos Miss Townley and her two sisters carry show pictures of her father before he was missing, and a picture of a man in a hospital bed in Laos in 1972, which she obtained from the U.S. Air Force.

The two look remarkably similar, and Miss Townley points to moles on the left side of her father's face which match those of the man in the photo. Yet, the U.S. government has determined that the photos of the man are not her father. She knows the photos do not prove her father is still alive, but they do prove, she says, that he was alive in captivity and that he could still be alive and a prisoner. The Laotian government never provided information about Mr. Townley.

Her father would be in his mid 60s now, and time is running out, she said. And seeing him or knowing of his fate is something she hasn't

stopped thinking about since she was a 14-year-old girl in Laos.

"It always stays with you," she added. "You can still go out and have a good time, but every once in a while when I cut into a steak, I stop and wonder what daddy's eating tonight."

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Additional information on Americans in Vietnam began flooding the Defense Information Agency in 1977-78 after hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees fled after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

To date, the DIA has received more than 3,800 reports on the POW-MIA problem — including 770 reports of firsthand sightings of American prisoners, according to the POW-MIA Fact Book issued by the league of families. Of those sightings, 62 percent correlated with sightings of POWs who returned in 1973. Another 22 percent were determined to be fabrications.

That leaves 16 percent of the sightings about which the DIA is uncertain. This translates into some 120 sightings that are unverified and still under investigation. And intelligence officials, such as Lt. Gen. Eugene Tighe, head of the DIA from 1975-81, cite these reports as reasons for their belief that Americans are still being held captive in Southeast Asia.

"I testified regularly that large numbers of unclassified reports flowing in to DIA pointed to the existence of live Americans held against their will in Southeast Asia," Lt. Gen. Tighe said in a recent statement before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs.

The most significant information, which indicates that the government of Vietnam has not provided all of the information it could about MIAs, is the testimony of a Vietnamese refugee, commonly referred to as "the mortician."

The mortician, whose name remains secret, told the U.S. government in 1980 there were some 400 sets of remains of Americans in a warehouse outside Hanoi. To date, Vietnam has returned fewer than 60 sets — including 26 they recently promised to deliver.

The mortician also told of seeing three Caucasians who were not in captivity. His testimony is considered believable because he has passed polygraphs and his reports have been confirmed by other accounts. The mortician's information has been deemed "very credible" by U.S. government intelligence.

Another piece of evidence pointed to by many are U.S. intelligence reports of sightings in the northern areas in the mid- and late-1970s by Vietnamese refugees of an

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